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**DO YOU REMEMBER *MILENA* AND *MERLINKA*?
GENDER IMAGERY FROM THE YUGOSLAV *SUPRA*
NATIONALISM TO THE *SUPER* NATIONALISMS AND
WAR IN THE NINETIES**

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In the past decade wartime gender imagery manipulations in former Yugoslavia have figured prominently in scholarly research. Numerous authors have focused on the issue without however transcending deeply rooted disciplinary boundaries. This paper proposes an interdisciplinary film journey through Dušan Makavejev's WR: The Mysteries of the Organism (1971) and Željko Žilnik's Marble Ass (1995) as a critique of the dominant views of the linkage between gender imagery and the violent post-Yugoslav nationalistic practices.

Both films openly question the persistence of the rigid definitions of male and female roles in society, within their respective, socialist and nationalistic, realities. Makavejev, through a satiric representation of Wilhelm Reich's controversial theories, criticizes the institutionalized and dogmatic character of socialist Yugoslavia, while Žilnik depicts the paradoxical implications of the "Balkan pacification" process, once war and nationalism become the raison d'être of a country. The institutionalized praxis of socio-cultural reproduction of inequality, in conjunction with the emergence of new, aggressive nationalistic projects, reinforced the misrepresentations of gender imagery. Men were increasingly depicted as the "heroes", the courageous warriors protecting the nation, while women were primarily there to reproduce the nation symbolically and biologically. Reproductive processes became part of reproductive ideologies, which later shaped nationalistic discourse and state propaganda. The nation became the fundamental actor, passing from the supposed

supra nationalism, embodied in Yugoslavia's "brotherhood and unity", to a super veneration of the nation and the purity of the ethnos.

Key words: Gender imagery, nationalism, war, Yugoslav film, Žilnik, Makavejev

Introduction

When talking about war and remembrance in former Yugoslavia, it is difficult not to address the question of the usage of gender imagery and its subsequent (mis)representations. There is a strong link between war and gender, meaning that warfare largely relies and preserves the traditional ideological constructions of what is thought to be masculinity and femininity. Sponsored mostly by governments and military institutions, media representations favored the construction of separate male and female realities.¹

Even though the manipulation of gender imagery is not a novelty, during the transition from a *supra* national ideal, embodied in Yugoslavia's "brotherhood and unity" to a *super* nationalistic one, gendered imagery followed different evolutionary stages. Feminine images were increasingly used as symbols of national "purity" and the emphasis was put on women's responsibility to reproduce and guard the newly invigorated patriarchal order which was presented as ancient, invincible and right. Nationalistic rhetorics were officially enforcing pro-natal policies, using them as one of the mobilizing factors for war. Progressively, women started to acquire "territorial" characteristics representing the symbolic boundaries of the nation. Eventually, when the force of nationalism escalated into warfare, women became equated with the material borders of the nation, and hence the nation itself. Men, by contrast, were the leading actors, the courageous warriors and protectors of the nation.

Bearing in mind that gender and nationalism are both socio-cultural categories and thus politically intermingled, the present paper aims to explore the extent to which the success of nationalism depended on the symbolic construction of gender imagery. To do so, the present paper proposes a film journey through Dušan Makavejev's *WR: The Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) and Želimir Žilnik's *Marble Ass* (1995).

On the one hand, Makavejev's representation of Wilhelm Reich's theories, apart from criticizing the Yugoslav dogmatic reality, explores the possible ways out of the strict and institutionalized gender ideology. Milena (Milena Dravić),

¹ Obrad KESIĆ, "Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia: Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Witches and Wombs", in *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans – Women and society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states*, ed. by Sabrina RAMET, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, 187-202.

the protagonist in the film, calls for equality and free love under socialism. Even though prone to romantic and poetic expressions, the satiric masculinization of Milena's behavior reflects a broader critique towards the female role and position in Yugoslav society. On the other hand Žilnik, by introducing the transgendered nature of his characters, criticizes the hegemonic pretensions of the rigid, overtly nationalistic, societal order during the Nineties. Once war became an everyday reality, Merlinka (Vjeran Miladinović), the main star and an actual transvestite prostitute, ironically emerged as the main protector of common sense.

Even if the selected films are individual aesthetic contributions of two avant-garde Yugoslav directors, they appear to be well suited in challenging and destabilizing the hegemonic pretension of a "naturalized" societal order, both in socialist Yugoslavia and in the new nationalisms of the Nineties.

Gendered Symbolism: from Supra Nationalism to Super Nationalism

If one would have to think about two dominant images which somehow symbolized male and female agency during the Yugoslav wars, the first one would probably depict men deciding upon the future of the newly created independent nation-states; the second one would most likely show women as a victimized collective.

Even if women's victimization became one of the most manipulated discourses during the Yugoslav wars, it paradoxically turned out to be one of the powerful instruments of women's engagement. Žarkov argues that victimization and agency are not necessarily to be regarded as disconnected or contradictory processes, but rather reciprocally constitutive.² In fact, women's victimization narrative became an important source for feminist activism, also representing a significant component of the empirical and theoretical knowledge in the field. Even though the idea of *supra*-nationalism does not imply a complete suppression of the traditional national cultures of Yugoslav peoples together with their patriarchal elements, one still wonders how fifty years of socialist emancipation simply vanished before the appearance of the aggressive nationalisms in the Nineties.

The mobilization of women during the Yugoslav National Liberation War together with the creation of the Anti-Fascist Women's Front in 1942 marked the beginning of women's stronger socio-political engagement. However, mainly with respect to the progressive strengthening of its political influence, the organization was abolished already in 1953.³ Barbara Jancar-Webster asserts

² Dubravka ŽARKOV, *The Body Of War: Media Ethnicity and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 216.

³ Svetlana SLAPŠAK, "Žene i rat u bivšoj Jugoslaviji", *Republika*, Belgrade, August 1996, 145-146.

that while women's participation in the National Liberation War was vital for the communist victory, after providing their support most women were not prepared to continue the struggle for equality.⁴ In some way, the rights gained through women's participation in war (the right to vote, education, abortion, etc.) had been already "too" revolutionary and the "partizanka" discourse shifted from the public to the domestic sphere. One could claim that the sort of "direct access" to progressive female rights during socialism was one of the reasons for women's inertia during the escalation of nationalism in the Nineties. The necessity to fight and struggle for the already secured liberties might have been perceived as surprising and unusual. Scholarly literature (Ramet, Papić, Magaš, Bilić *et al.*) suggests that while women's emancipation project represented an integral element of Tito's socialist agenda, granting women several progressive legal rights, neither the party nor the country had an active, long-term vision in the attainment of gender equality.⁵

Moreover, even though female political emancipation allowed for some women to occupy the highest positions in the state apparatus, the key decisions were often coming from above, in the form of directives.⁶ The realization of women within the political arena somehow remained subordinated to the accomplishment of the development strategy of Yugoslav self-management.

Nevertheless, the general lack of "sisterhood and unity" and a common sense of identity, transcending the traditional patriarchal ideology and ethnic "otherness", marginalized even more women and eased the emergence of nationalistic male elites. The new, nationalistic projects did not leave space for social justice; on the contrary they clearly imposed a re-invigorated patriarchal order and favored the progressive disappearance of women from the public realm. Moreover, gender imagery started to assume a much more figurative significance, essentially based on the (re)interpretations of the glorious mythological past.⁷ However, the relationship between nationalism and gender imagery appears to be quite an inconsistent one. If one only thinks about the main nationalistic symbols, they appear to be almost all of female gender i.e. motherland, nation, glory etc. Moreover, there is no shortage of cases in which female figures symbolize the nation (Mother Russia, Mother Ireland or Mother India).⁸ Mosse identifies in

4 Barbara JANCAR-WEBSTER, "Women in the Yugoslav National Liberation Movement", in *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans – Women and society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states*, ed. by Sabrina RAMET, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, 84-87.

5 Sabrina RAMET (ed.), *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans – Women and society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

6 Ivana PANTELIC, *Partizanke kao gradanke: društvena emancipacija partizanki u Srbiji, 1945-1953*, Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Evoluta, 2011.

7 Žarana PAPIĆ, "From State Socialism to State Nationalism: The Case of Serbia in Gender Perspective", *Refuge*, vol. 14 (1994), 12.

8 Nira YUVAL-DAVIS, "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations", *Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research*, vol. 40 (2003), 18.

German and English eighteenth-century bourgeois "respectability" the roots of the strict delineations between "normal" and "abnormal" sexuality, which along with the rigid separation of male and female labor progressively induced the stereotyping of sexual roles.⁹ While the cult of masculinity emerged, often visually linked to classical aesthetics (ancient Greek male statues), women were increasingly representing the image of mothers of the nation. The line between normalcy and abnormalcy, male and female had to be tight in order to protect the nation from its potential enemies.¹⁰

Nira Yuval-Davis stresses how gender is central to the construction of national identities. She argues that: "gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities as well as in most cultural conflicts and contestations".¹¹ With femininity being the foundation of nationalistic narratives, the symbolic construction of nations assumed forms of feminine images. However, the very usage of feminine images to represent the nation often implies a male character to safeguard its protection.

Even though women symbolically represent the nation, Cynthia Enloe observes that "nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope".¹² Thus if nations emphasize and hold masculinized values, the nation consequently transforms itself in a micro-paradigm of the patriarchal family, where citizenship is viewed only as brotherhood. Zillah Eisenstein asserts that "nations are made up of citizens and the fiction here requires that anyone can be of the nation" but somehow women always end up "divided in brotherhood".¹³ In nationalist movements, even though women are supposed to be the genuine symbols and breeders of the nation's purity, women turned out to be just the "objectified other". Paradoxically, women's *raison d'être* became to satisfy the man and reproduce the very same female values, without having direct access to any of them.

As soon as the new "male democracies" of the Nineties took power in the former Yugoslavia, women's bodies became "everybody's business"¹⁴. Moreover, nationalistic rhetoric fueled Foucault's so-called praxis of "bio-politics," where political actors were officially enforcing pro-natal policies.¹⁵ The legal

9 George L. MOSSE, *Nationalism and Sexuality: respectability and abnormal sexuality in modern Europe*, New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1985.

10 George L. MOSSE, "Nationalism and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Europe", *Culture and Society*, (1983), 78.

11 YUVAL-DAVIS, "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations", 16.

12 Cynthia ENLOE, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 45.

13 Zillah EISENSTEIN, "Writing Bodies on the Nation for the Globe", in *Women States and Nationalism: At home in the Nation?* ed. by Sita RANCHOD-NILSSON-Mary, Ann TETREAU, London: Routledge, 2000, 42.

14 Vesna KESIĆ, "Muslim women, Croatian women, Serbian women, Albanian Women", <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2003-05-09-kesic-en.html> (15/10/2013).

15 Gail KLIGMAN-Susan GAL, "Gendering Postsocialism: Reproduction as Politics in East Central Europe" in *Between Past and Future. The Revolutions of 1989 and their Aftermath*, ed. by Sorin ANTOHI-Vladimir, TISMANEANU, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2000, 198-215.

right to abortion was persistently threatened while the image of the inevitable demographic crisis, or even a possible “extinction” of the nation, was publicly portrayed. The demographic renewal projects became a top priority in almost all the post-Yugoslav realities, in which the political leaders, with the strong support of the religious institutions, were advocating an increase in ethnically “pure” birthrates. Thus, reproductive processes became a critical part of reproductive ideologies, which, especially in times of nationalistic tumult, strongly shaped gender imagery constructs.

Following the evolution of gender imagery from the ideal of socialist *supra* to *super* nationalism, we can assert that the construction of female imagery pursued different evolutionary stages and acquired diverse implications, as nationalistic vigor was on the rise. In fact, during the construction of nationalistic propaganda, the woman embodied the symbols of national purity and honor and her main responsibilities were to guard and reproduce the patriarchal order. Progressively, women started to acquire “territorial” characteristics, representing the symbolic boundaries of the nation. If women belonged to the nation then they were defended and protected, otherwise their bodies could be simply violated. Žarkov argues that depending on women’s position, inside (us) or outside (them) a given ethnic group, their bodies are either subject to protection or assault.¹⁶

Ultimately, when nationalism escalated in warfare, women became equated with nations representing their material borders. Thus, the annihilation of the “other” nation by penetrating the enemy’s nation/women eventually feminized the land itself. The already binary and oppositional nature of nations (us-them) and gender (male-female), in concomitance with the political need of creating ethnically “pure” nations, facilitated the usage of female bodies as territorial markers.¹⁷ Women, who at the same time symbolized the highest values of the nation, eventually remained under domi-nation.

Gender Manipulations: from Veneration to Penetration and Victimization

Since gender and nations are culturally, historically and politically interwoven, gendered symbolism tends to be manipulated in order to uphold the existing power structures, and to appear natural and difficult to alter.¹⁸

16 ŽARKOV, *The Body Of War: Media Ethnicity and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia*, 19; Tamara BANJEGLAV, *Gender, Nation, Rape: Intersections of Gender and Ethnic Violence during the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, MA dissertation, CEU 2009, www.etd.ceu.hu/2009/banjeglav_tamara.pdf (15/10/2013).

17 Julie MOSTOV, “Sexing the Nation/Desexing the Body: Politics of National Identity in the Former Yugoslavia” in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. by Tamar MAYER, London: Routledge, 2000, 89-110.

18 YUVAL-DAVIS, “Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations”, 9.

Especially with the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia, such manipulations were needed in order to legitimize political hierarchies and war mobilizations. In his article *Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia*, Obrad Kesić classifies the most common war images of women as “*Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Wombs, and Witches*”.¹⁹ From one side, all these images are deeply rooted in the traditional patriarchal ideology; from another side, all these images were/are deeply validated at all levels of society. The latter phenomenon may appear of greater concern, once we historically explain women’s inertia during the emergence of the “mega” power of nationalism. This is, however, not to underestimate the significance of female activism in the *pre-* and *post-*Yugoslav period. In fact, feminist initiatives, although part of an ideologically complex and heterogeneous phenomenon in the post-Yugoslav space, will represent one of the bases of the peace and anti-war activism.²⁰ Promoting anti-nationalistic and anti-militaristic values, staging anti-war protests and helping war victims, feminist groups will have a significant influence on the post-Yugoslav human-rights civic activism.

Nevertheless, the choice of an interdisciplinary approach, a cinematographic excursion through Makavejev’s, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) and Žilnik’s *Marble Ass* (1995) wanted to stress the importance of film as a source of socio-cultural critique, especially when considering the issue of gender manipulation and destabilization.

At the beginning of the 1960s, in the Yugoslav cinematographic production, young and talented authors started to break out of the rigid soc-realist art doctrine and followed individualistic expressions of aesthetic experimentation.²¹ These tendencies, inspired by Italian Neo-realism, French Nouvelle Vague and other influences in European cinema, later became recognized under the name of *The Black Wave*. The name firstly appeared in the newspaper *Borba*²² in 1969, as a result of an ideological campaign of the socialist apparatus against some of the movement’s members, found guilty of presenting an “unappealing” image of the Yugoslav socialist reality.²³ Dušan Makavejev and Želimir Žilnik along with other prominent directors (Aleksandar Petrović, Živojin Pavlović, Krsto Papić, *et. al.*) challenged the self-propagated brightness of the Yugoslav official culture through

19 KESIĆ, “Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia: Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Witches and Wombs”, 187-202.

20 E.g. “Centar za žene žrtve rata” in Croatia, “Žene u crnom” in Serbia or “Medica Zenica” in Bosnia-Herzegovina, explored in Dora KOMNENOVIĆ, “Ženski Antiratni Anagažman Ranih Devedesetih Godina u (Bivšoj) Jugoslaviji”, unpublished paper; Bojan BILIĆ “Recovering (Post-)Yugoslav Anti-War and Pacifist Activism. A research agenda”, *The South Slav Journal*, vol. 30 (2011), 24-56.

21 Pavle LEVI, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007; Daniel GOULDING, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience, 1945-2001*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

22 Vladimir JOVIČIĆ, “‘Crni val’ u našem filmu”, *Borba*, 3 August 1969, 17-24.

23 Boris BUDEN, “Shoot It Black! An introduction to Želimir Žilnik” in *Surfing the Black: Black Wave Cinema and its Transgressive Moment*, ed. by Gal KIRN, Dubravka SEKULIĆ, Žiga TESTEN, Jan van Eyck Academie and Early Works, 2010, p. 171, http://monoskop.org/images/f/f7/Kirn_Sekulic_Testen_eds_Surfing_the_Black_Yugoslav_Black_Wave_Cinema_and_Its_Transgressive_Moments.pdf (8/5/2014).

an engaged socio-political production. Their views didn't necessarily imply the negation of socialism as such, but represented an important critique of the socialist dogmatic structures.

Even though socialist Yugoslavia was characterized by a rather "austere" societal order, the question of sexuality was discussed and recognized throughout a variety of disciplines, from gynecology to philosophy and sociology. Jovanović suggests that sexology "has been the key discourse of the socialist cultural revolution that was supposed to introduce Yugoslavia into the gender and sexual modernity".²⁴ Moreover, he asserts that the legal repression of different sexual orientations, such as homosexuality, was not a product of a predefined totalitarian socialist dogma, but rather an issue stimulating further redefinitions and debate. In spite of that, patriarchal hetero-normativity remained the dominant discourse in sexology and in the wider socio-political agenda.

Dušan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, even though constructed around the inflexible socio-political reality of Yugoslavia in the Seventies, engagingly reminds us to rethink the correlations between gender constructs and political power. Theoretically framed by the philosophy of Wilhelm Reich, Makavejev suggests that the only cure to avoiding neurosis and mental disorders in a sexually repressed environment (Yugoslavia at the time), is a guilt-free sex life and love under socialism: "between socialism and physical love there can be no conflict. Socialism must not exclude human sensual pleasures from its program". Criticizing the Soviet revolution of having rejected free love, Makavejev seems to warn us about the dangers associated with the often neglected relationship between an "incomplete" sexuality and the sphere of materialistic and political aspirations. Questioning the "dark side" of the Yugoslav apparatus, the film was suppressed by the Yugoslav officials and shelved for sixteen years. Nonetheless, the relationship between (repressed) sexuality and hegemonic politics appears to closely relate to the escalations of violence and gender stereotyping in the nation-building-conservation process during the Nineties.

Media-generated and political elites' nationalistic propaganda abused the representations of gender imagery adding new aspects to the already overtly patriarchal gender constructs. If the duty of men was to fight for their country, another female duty was to be sexually available and to boost the morale of the troops.²⁵ Women, besides being regarded as sexual objects, were frequently imagined as symbolic recompenses for the "brave and courageous" men, who were struggling to maintain an uncontaminated national purity. This view consequently implied that men who fight for their nation have a sort of fee-access to female

24 Nebojša JOVANOVIĆ, "Seksologija, muška homoseksualnost i film", in *Socijalizam na Klupi: Jugoslavensko društvo očima nove postjugoslavenske humanistike*, ed. by Lada DURAKOVIĆ, Andrea MATOŠEVIĆ, Zagreb-Pula: Srednja Europa, 2013, 152.

25 KESIĆ, "Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia: Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Witches and Wombs", 187-202.

bodies, thankful for being defended and protected.

Authors like the U.S. law professor Catherine MacKinnon tried to argue that the dissemination of pornography was the main cause of the carnages committed during the Yugoslav wars: "with this war, pornography emerges as a tool of genocide."²⁶ Even if pornography plays a significant role in militarized realities, it would be oversimplifying to state that pornography *per se* represented one of the main causes of slaughter during the Yugoslav wars. While MacKinnon's statements would probably facilitate the understanding of the societal trends in a post-Yugoslav momentum, here we want to stress that the reiteration of gender manipulations, enforced during the Nineties, played a role in the enhanced brutality of the killings, using rape (rather than pornography) as one of the tools of waging war.²⁷

The systemic use of rape as an instrument of warfare imposed the female victimization discourse, which was persistently manipulated by the national governments to provoke additional public support for the continuation of the war. Even though the treatment of rape as national question should have been seen as a problem imposed from top-political levels, many of the feminist groups, domestic and international, during and in the aftermath of the war, didn't manage to escape fragmentation. One group of feminists saw rape exclusively in ethnic terms, as an act of one specific aggressor directed towards women of the "other" warring side. The second group condemned rape *per se*, focusing exclusively on the gender of the victims, regardless of their "degrees of national otherness". Nevertheless, the antagonism and the divisions among feminist groups surely did not favor the position of rape victims themselves; on the contrary, it further politicized the women's victimization discourse.

In this context, Želimir Žilnik's *Marble Ass*, allows us to further explore the developments of the empowered gender constructs and their consequences during the Nineties. Besides offering a remarkable representation of gay subcultures in Belgrade, *Marble Ass* is essentially an anti-war film challenging the intricate liaisons between violent power structures and gender. Even though the main protagonists of the film are two male transvestites, the film does not problematize the individual choices of one's sexual orientation but it is rather directed towards a broader condemnation of the persistence of the "macho man" culture and women's marginalization in war-torn societies.²⁸ Žilnik found the inspiration for the movie

26 Catherine MACKINNON, "Turning Rape Into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide", in *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. by Alexandra STIGLMAYER, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994, 75.

27 Vesna KESIĆ, "A Response to Catherine MacKinnon's Article, Turning Rape Into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide", *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, vol. 5 (1994), 267-280.

28 Kevin MOSS, "Vergini giurate e prostitute travestite: performance di genere e sessualità in due film jugoslavi", tr. Irene Dioli, *eSamizdat*, vol. 6 (2008), 111-122, http://www.esamizdat.it/rivista/2008/2-3/pdf/moss_inter_es_2008_%28VI%29_2-3.pdf (20/10/2013).

on the very streets of Belgrade by accidentally meeting the future star of *Marble Ass*, Vjeran Miladinović – Vera. Vera, one of his previous movie characters and now a transvestite, told him she never dared to come out openly as a girl but as Belgrade is in such a strange situation, she feels like “one of the most ordinary, normal people in the city”.²⁹ Wanting to escape the over manipulated female images and the masculinized power structures, Žilnik offers a spectrum from which to view gender instability. The critique here is directed towards the rigid separation between masculinity and femininity, and the stereotyped nature of gender identities.

Pavlović argues that “the domestication of women goes hand in hand with the creation of a new type of masculinity: *hypermasculinity*”.³⁰ Men are thus not endangered by women since they are silenced and marginalized. The need to reaffirm men’s virility comes from the profound concern over the ones who destabilize their own social category, the homosexuals. Accordingly, the ones who dared not fit in the rigid nationalistic gendered order were automatically accused of importing self-indulgent western ideology and of promoting “abnormal” sexual behaviors. The non-acceptance of the re-invigorated patriarchal and nationalistic structures made one sexually deviant, as was the case with most of the feminist activists who dared to separate gender from ethnicity when condemning mass rape and violence during the Yugoslav wars.

Even though in the most rural and underdeveloped parts of former Yugoslavia female sexuality was regarded as sinful, non-free and invisible, and feminist activism was perceived as something mysterious and misandrous, one still wonders why women, especially well-educated university professors or industry executives, did not raise their voices. Were they actually prepared to remain in hiber-nation and watch the newly invigorated patriarchy emerge?

Makavejev and Žilnik: From Sexual Freedom to War and Collective Alienation

Besides openly criticizing the legacy of Stalinism and the dogmatic Yugoslav self-management methods, Dušan Makavejev’s film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* presents a stance from which to view the links between gender and hegemonic politics. Milena (Milena Dravić), the main star, is dynamically involved in challenging sexual customs and traditions; she represents the figure of the

29 Greg DEQUIR, “Old School Capitalism: An Interview with Želimir Žilnik”, *Cineaste*, vol. 35 (2010), <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/emold-school-capitalism-an-interview-with-zelimir-zilnik-web-exclusive> (20/10/2013).

30 Tatjana PAVLOVIĆ, “Women in Croatia: Feminists, Nationalists, and Homosexuals”, in MOSS, “Vergini giurate e prostitute travestite: performance di genere e sessualità in due film jugoslavi”, 118.

emancipated woman, aware of her place in society. Milena is strongly engaged in spreading her revolutionary theory, calling for an ideological change through Reich’s libidinal theories of “orgastic potency”, for which the sources of sexual repression were to be found in bourgeois morality and in the socio-economic structures that produced it. As sexual repression was one of the main causes of the neurosis, the best cure would be to have an active, guilt-free sex life. In a Reichian sense, such liberation could come about only through a morality not imposed by a repressive and institutionalized socio-economic structure. Praying for equality and free love, “only by liberating both love and labor can we create a self-regulating worker’s society”, Milena exemplifies a critique of the frozen and repressed nature of revolution during Stalinism.³¹ Moreover, she is a metaphor for the Yugoslav working class’ struggle. Comparing Stalinism, “the October Revolution was condemned the moment it rejected free love”, to the Yugoslav experience, Makavejev seems to warn us about the possible implications and dangers of “societal anemia” and working class alienation.³² The different readings of communism and the possible dangers of the Yugoslav autonomous path towards socialism are exemplified in the relationship between Milena and the Russian ice-skating star Vladimir Ilyich (Ivica Vidović). When she first encounters Vladimir, she is impressed by the grandeur of his appearance; nevertheless she will not allow reducing herself to a docile political subject, she will continue the struggle for emancipation. Moreover, Milena symbolizes a more subtle critique of gender imagery and its subsequent masculine and feminine representations. During a visit to Milena’s apartment, Vladimir notices Hitler’s picture, surrounded by admiring women, hanging on the walls. He is confused and wants more clarity. Milena becomes furious and replies: “Look at these women, those stupid cows, those slaves. They honor, respect and love authority. They ascribe to this authority the primordial power of sex”. Yet, the admiring women on the picture are far from the cliché of the “uneducated countrywomen” stuck in deeply patriarchal, male dominated and backward realities. Makavejev firmly reminds us of the necessity for a broader political concern in the construction of gendered realities, exemplifying how women’s irrationality, and blind commitment to male elites in power, leads to the passive acceptance of their ideological despair.³³ Women’s adulation of power and authority eventually contributed to the inhumane and brutal practices of fascism, where the ideological structures objectified the female body. Simultaneously, the satiric masculinization of Milena’s conduct, presents a critique towards women’s inertia, pertinent not only to Yugoslavia at the time, but equally relevant in the post-Yugoslav, nationalistic era.

31 GOULDING, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience, 1945-2001*, 137-142.

32 LEVI, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*, 18-29.

33 Constantin PARVULESCU, “Betrayed Promises: Politics and Sexual Revolution in the Films of Márta Mészáros, Miloš Forman, and Dušan Makavejev”, *Camera Obscura*, vol. 24 (2009), 77-105.

Nevertheless, Vladimir Ilych, the big star, is confused by Milena's open and highly eroticized behavior. Vladimir is not able to cope with Milena's sexuality and he decapitates her with his ice-skate. It seems that the emancipated woman, challenging and unwilling to conform to the traditional, rigid power structures, has to die in order to learn the moral of the story. In a wider socio-political context, the totalitarian and permanent repression of diversity affects national identification, amplifying the dimension of the "other", which is no longer regarded as "comrade" but plays an antagonistic role. When Milena rebels in an uninhibited form, she is punished with death and rejected by the society. However, this is not to say that the struggle for liberation is concluded; her severed head, in the autopsy room, continues to imagine; she is not ashamed of having tried and not having succeeded.

Like in Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, the struggle for the emancipation from the dominant social order represents a central theme in Žilnik's *Marble Ass*.

The main characters, Merlinka and Sanela (Milja Milenković), two transvestite prostitutes, live their daily adventures in undeclared warring Serbia. Merlinka earns her living on the streets of Belgrade while her housemate Sanela performs as a professional dancer, or, to put it in Merlinka's words, as a "turbo-trapeze whore". They both dream about a different world and wish for a glamorous escape from the male-dominated and violent environment impersonated in Johnny's (Nenad Racković) character. When Merlinka sees Johnny, a young gangster who just returned from the Bosnian front, she is first of all surprised he is alive. Whilst observing him carry a pool table she cynically asserts: "people from the battlefields brought fridges, Mercedes(es) and gold while my Johnny brought home (only) a damaged cupboard". In such a lawless reality, the relationship between Merlinka and Johnny becomes crucial when trying to understand the constant tension between male and female, war and peace, life or death. Merlinka relentlessly reminds Johnny that life is not a battlefield and that it is going to be him, not her, who is the one to "lose his head".

Besides openly criticizing the corrosive societal values of warfare, Žilnik questions the issues of gender imagery and its constructs. On the one side we find the image of the woman as warrior, impersonated by Johnny's battlefield friend, a female officer (Suzana Zlatanović). De-feminized and wearing a combat uniform, even Merlinka doesn't recognize the officer is a woman.³⁴ On the other side we find Merlinka's old friend Ruža (Lidija Stevanović), representing the symbol of the typical, patriarchal image of the woman as housewife, whose sexuality is invisible and subordinated to the will of the husband. When the two accidentally meet, Ruža will remain flabbergasted by Merlinka's new look, in fact she will

³⁴ During a certain stage in television propaganda, the image of a masculinized female figure fighting for the survival of the nation was used by the nationalistic governments as an instrument for further, especially male, war mobilization.

ask: "Dragan! What did you do?" As Moss stressed, it is particularly symptomatic that Ruža addresses Merlinka in a masculine form; she still sees in Merlinka her previous masculine nature.³⁵ Merlinka "rescues" Ruža from her personal despair, as her husband recently left her, by offering her work as a prostitute. Paradoxically, Merlinka will have to be the one who teaches Ruža how to be sensual, feminine and eventually attract clients. Nevertheless, Ruža, unable to cope with her new lifestyle, returns to her everyday reality, the kitchen. Merlinka regretfully asserts: "You came to Belgrade to become a whore, not a housewife!" This return to "normality" appears essential in order to emphasize the rigidity and the stability of gender constructs.

Moreover, throughout the movie, Žilnik effectively manages to address the issues of violence. Accused by Johnny of being (just) a whore Merlinka replies: "Me a whore? I'm a nurse, a saint. I've saved a lot of young girls from being raped. How many would be the unhappy and traumatized girls?" Thus, "Balkan pacification" and the protection of vulnerable young women, from the aggressive gangsters returning home from the battlefronts, became Merlinka's main mission in society.

The film highlights how the struggle against violence persists as the *leitmotiv* of male-dominated realities once the top-down manipulations of patriarchal and nationalistic tendencies degrade woman's position in society. Nevertheless in the atmosphere of an anti-war film Žilnik saves Merlinka, and she does not "lose her head". On the contrary, Johnny, the strong and virile warrior dies, killed by his very same criminal milieu. Merlinka, not willing to conform to the dominant patriarchal order, emerges as the exclusive protector of common sense and humanity.³⁶ Even though ethnic and national constructs are not explicitly addressed, the film illustrates the necessity to undermine the hegemonic pretensions of a "naturalized" societal order and gender stability, especially when there is a wish from the top-political levels to mobilize the nation for war.

Concluding Thoughts

Even though women's emancipation project in Yugoslavia represented an integral element of Tito's socialist agenda, the former country remained a patriarchal apparatus where women secured several progressive legal rights, but didn't manage to maintain, or better, establish a long lasting sense of "sisterhood and unity".

Despite the importance of the feminist engagement, especially the one that managed to escape ethnic fragmentation, and their subsequent anti-war

³⁵ MOSS, "Vergini giurate e prostitute travestite: performance di genere e sessualità in due film jugoslavi", 120.

³⁶ LEVI, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*, 18-28.

activism, women were somehow well prepared to remain inactive and watch the new, aggressive ideology emerge. Moreover, the manipulations of gender imagery, imposed by the nationalistic elites in power, reinforced the already patriarchal and male-centered representations. Feminine images were increasingly used as symbols of the nation, and emphasis was put on women's responsibility to biologically reproduce the newly formed nation-states. When nationalism escalated into warfare, women turned out to be the actual territorial markers of the nation. The ones who were not willing to conform to the reinvigorated nationalistic order were publicly portrayed as national enemies and/or labeled as sexually deviant.

In this context, both Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and Žilnik's *Marble Ass* present a critique of the dominant views of the links between gender and hegemonic politics. On the one hand, by introducing Merlinka's transgendered character, Žilnik destabilizes the rigidity of separate male and female realities. On the other hand, Makavejev satirizes both political dogmatism and the implications of an incomplete sexuality which eventually subjugates the experience of freedom to a wider institutionalization of politics and their structures.

Nevertheless, both Milena and Merlinka struggled for freedom from the dominant, right and "naturalized" order. Does the experience of freedom still make sense today?³⁷ Or, as Boris Buden asserts, the only freedom we still experience is actually the fear of losing it?

37 Boris BUDEN, "Behind the Velvet Curtain. Remembering Dušan Makavejev's W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism", *Afterall*, vol. 18 (2008), 118-126, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.18/behind.velvet.curtain.remembering.dusan.makavejevs> (8/5/2014).

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FILMS

1. *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* ("WR: Misterije organizma"), directed by Dušan Makavejev, screenplay Dušan Makavejev, Neoplanta Film: Novi Sad, 1971.
2. *Marble Ass* ("Dupe od Mramora"), directed by Želimir Žilnik, screenplay Želimir Žilnik, Radio B 92: Beograd, 1995.

SAŽETAK

SJEĆATE LI SE MILENE I MERLINKE? RODNA PREDODŽBA OD JUGOSLAVENSKOG SUPRA NACIONALIZMA DO SUPER NACIONALIZAMA I RATA U DEVEDESETIMA

Mateja SINČIĆ

U proteklom desetljeću manipulacija ratnom rodnom predodžbom bila je česta tema u socio-političkim istraživanjima o bivšoj Jugoslaviji. Iako su brojni autori ukazivali na taj problem, malo se radova odmaklo od ukorijenjenih granica pojedinačnih disciplina. Ovaj rad predlaže kritiku vodećih pogleda na poveznice između rodne predodžbe i nasilnih, post-jugoslavenskih nacionalnih praksi, interdisciplinarnom analizom filmova *WR: Misterije organizma* (1971.) Dušana Makavejeva i *Dupe od mramora* (1995.) Želimira Žilnika.

Oba filma otvoreno dovode u pitanje rigidnost definicija muških i ženskih uloga u društvu, kako u socijalističkoj, tako i u nacionalističkoj stvarnosti. Makavejev, putem satiričkog predstavljanja kontroverznih teorija Wilhelma Reicha, kritizira dogmatičnu narav socijalističke Jugoslavije, dok Žilnik dočarava paradoksalne implikacije procesa „Balkanskog pomirenja“, onda kada rat i nacionalizam postaju *raison d'être* zemlje. Institucionalizirana praksa društveno-kulturne reprodukcije nejednakosti, zajedno s pojavom novih, agresivnih nacionalističkih projekata, pojačala je iskrivljeno predstavljanje rodne predodžbe. Muškarci su najčešće prikazivani kao „heroji“, odvažni vojnici koji brane naciju, dok su žene primarno trebale množiti naciju, simbolički i biološki. Tako su reproduktivni procesi postali dio reproduktivnih ideologija, koje su kasnije oblikovale nacionalne diskurse i državnu propagandu. Posljedično, nacije su postale ključni čimbenici, prelazeći iz ideala *supra* nacionalizma, oličenog u jugoslavenskom „bratstvu i jedinstvu“, u *super* obožavanje etnički čiste nacije.